

# The Wearing of the Kirpan

Sikhs don't want to deal with



Pritam Singh



# The Wearing of the Kirpan

Sikhs don't want to deal with

Pritam Singh

1998

The Wearing of the Kirpan: A personal testimony that Sikhs don't want to deal with. By Pritam Singh [Revised, but originally published in April 1989 -Sikh News & Views Vol. XIV No. 2]

As a Sikh youth who grew up in Canada, I have through the years, tried to understand my place in the community. In June 1968, our family travelled by car across Canada from Vancouver to Toronto. At that time, there were two groups which held gurdwara services, but they didn't like each other. One service took place at the North Toronto Memorial Gardens (Eglinton arena) and another at the East York Community Centre.

In the fall of 1968, some efforts were underway to consolidate the two gurdwaras. My father, who was on the Executive

Committee, played a role in finding the building and bringing both groups together. This turned out to be the building on 269 Pape Avenue.

During the next year, my elder sister and I attended some classes on Sikhism at the gurdwara. These were the first ever series of lectures on the Ten Gurus, with photocopied lessons prepared and presented by Kuldeep Singh (who runs the Detroit Sikh Youth Camps). These lectures were held on most Sundays from May 25 to August 3, 1969. At the time, I was fourteen years old, and was very impressed by them. At the end of the course, my sister and I and two other twins (boy & girl) came first in the exam! It was my fathers' association with Kuldeep Singh as a "Panthic" man that I remember the most. The lessons have been preserved in my collection.

Later in the year, during summertime, a group of holy men headed by "Sant" Mihan Singh (of Clairan Valeh) came to stay in the gurdwara. At the time, I really had little interest in going to the gurdwara, since I did not speak Punjabi nor could I understand it. Since those people came, I was fascinated with their performance of kirtan (hymns sung from the Guru Granth) - while sitting on the carpet floor facing the Guru, (instead of the raised platform used by ragis -hymn singers) all of them wearing white clothes. They looked different. It was the first time that I had seen a "Sant".

At first, I did not know who or what "Sants" were. So I asked my father and he explained what they were -holy men! Although I was not accustomed to seeing them, I would go to the gurdwara and listen to the kirtan they performed. It was performed as continuous repetition/chanting with the melodic beat of the tabla (Indian drums). Mihan Singh would play tabla, even though he appeared to be in his 60's. Most of the kirtan focused on that aspect of the Bani of Sukhmani, where a need for a Guru and the qualities of a Sadh (Saint - holy person) and Brahm Gyani (Knower of God) are stressed. Upon listening, it became immediately apparent that the Bani was really referring to "Sant" Mihan Singh. In the back of my mind, I thought to myself: "Sikhs only regard the Guru Granth and no human being as their Guru".

Listening to their style of kirtan focused attention from my surroundings and my mind felt "numb". It didn't make any sense, only somehow I experienced a calmness of mind, difficult to put into words. These men had an aura of "religiousness" about them and I felt afraid, but also knew that it was impossible to approach them for discussion. Later, I demanded to know why they wore different style of turbans (white round ones). Once I understood, I adopted the same style at home, though my father disliked it. That was because he didn't want me becoming like them. To me, I felt it was much easier to wrap this kind of turban, rather than doing the big one.

Since we lived closeby and I felt attracted to the music they played, I started going regularly to the evening diwans (religious functions in a gurdwara). Sitting down for any length of time was a problem for me at first. The discomfort I felt sitting cross-legged even for a few minutes, eventually went away, as I became more and more engrossed in the kirtan. This did not come without enduring severe bouts of pain in both my ankles and legs. At about the same time, my father received some books destined for the library of the gurdwara, from a Tejinder Singh, who was the President of Pape gurdwara (Shromani Sikh Society), but had moved to Ottawa. Since I was curious to read anything about Sikhism, I started reading some of the books. I found the books to be a goldmine of information, despite the fact that they made me feel guilty for not being the stereotype of a typical male Sikh.

Even before the "Sant" arrived in Toronto, I was experiencing dreams. These dreams prompted me to read books about ESP, Yoga and Mysticism. I later realized that the dreams were really experiences of astral travelling. The effect of yoga and the company of "Sadhs" created a sense of aloofness. Since I did not have any friends, I kept to myself. I guess I was to a degree, hypnotized by these "Sants" and my mother noticed the change in my behaviour.

As I continued attending the diwans every evening during the weekdays, I found there were few people who were in attendance. That generated a lot of attention. Usually, when kirtan is performed, there should be a person who sits with the Guru Granth. On a number of occasions, the "Sant" would start kirtan punctually, but no one would sit over the Guru Granth. This had been on my mind for a while and I really dreaded being asked to do that service. Yet I wondered how it was done.

In one diwan, a thought went through my mind - the kirtan had started and no one was sitting with the Guru. All of a sudden, one of the members of the Sant's Jatha (group) asked me to go ahead and do it! I understood the gesture. I went and bowed my head and got hold of the "chauri" (afterwards I realized I hadn't washed my hands, but nobody pointed this out to me either) which is a flybrush used to denote royalty to the Guru Granth. As I proceeded to go through the motions of doing the "chauri sewa" (service with the flybrush) I was nervous and the motions of waving the chauri came with a few wobbles and then another thought came to my mind: "What will I do when the Ardas (congregational prayer) is done, since someone has to read from the Guru afterwards?" I couldn't read and neither could I speak Punjabi. After the Ardas was performed, Mihan Singh walked around the Guru Granth and pat me on the back. At least one man who accompanied him, loudly uttered something, "this boy has received a thaapara"



(a blessing). Other people looked on in awe, but I really felt relieved as soon as another person took my place.

Because of this, a gentleman by the name of Resham Singh Namdhari (a sect of Sikhs) took me to Mihan Singh. Mihan Singh was staying in a room that was normally used for storage. I went along and once I was in his presence, Resham Singh asked Mihan Singh for a "mala" (rosary or meditation beads) be given to me. In fact, in his zeal, he got the mala from the Sant and put it around my neck. In due course, the "Sant" uttered some verse from Bani "Raang laagatha laagatha hai?" Of course, I didn't know what it all meant, other than simply observing the whole thing and feeling a bit strange of having a mala around my neck!

Our family with the exception for my father, held the "Sant" in awe. My father did attend the Sunday diwans on a few occasions. In the next year 1970, another "Sant" Amar Singh came. Around this time, a friend of my father who was into Electronics, gave me a reel tape recorder as a gift. It was my fascination for gadgets which led me to tape record the kirtan of the "Sant" in the Pape gurdwara. Since then, I have amassed over 500 cassette tapes and hundreds of hours on reel tapes. Most of my collection contains historic political speeches of Dr. Jagjit Singh Chohan (on Khalistan), Kapur Singh, Nirlep Kaur, Yogi Bhajan and other political events that took place in Toronto in the early 70's. I also taped a lot of kirtan of ragi jathas. What I



value the most is the kathas (religious discourses) of Sant Singh Maskeen, from which I got a glimpse of Sikh Theology.

Due to regular attendance at the diwans, the followers of "Sant" Amar Singh felt my longing to accompany the group to their stopover at Montreal. That didn't happen, but one of the men in the group, gave me a booklet entitled, "The Way to Establish Permanent Peace" by Sant Teja Singh, M.A. LL.B., (Punjab) A.M. Harvard. This booklet contains an address given on the occasion of the Eighth Congress of Religions for the World Peace, organized by Ananai-Kyo, Shimizu City, Japan 1956.

The booklet had a profound effect upon me. It actually compares two different types of research. Religion being a subjective one and science as objective, i.e., it deals with the physical framework of the universe. Some views are given on the nature of the universe by Albert Einstein and Kirtley F. Mather. It goes on to talk about what Guru Arjan says in his Sukhmani (The Jewel of Peace and Atonement) about the highest dharma (religion) as "Meditation on the Divine Name and the performance of righteous and unselfish actions in our daily life". It also mentions the stages (as per Guru Arjan) that all true seekers of truth go through before achieving God-consciousness.

The booklet made sense about a practical method to practice meditation and the reasoning behind it. It also became my mainstay for the next couple of years. During this time, I met another friend of my father, Tarlok Singh. I really got along with this gentleman, since he and I were interested in the same subject -Sikh mysticism. He was my first mentor, a person who I could really relate to. In the following year 1971, "Sant" Mihan Singh -the first "Sant" I had ever known, arrived again, in the middle of spring.

This time, Amrit was to be given at the conclusion of their stay. In our family, my father felt no need to become initiated, since he had taken Amrit in India, in a jatha of Nihangs (warrior sect of Sikhs). Actually, my father was skeptical of being administered Amrit by a "Sant". So my mother and two elder sisters and myself were baptised. The Amrit was prepared by the "sewadars" and the "Sant" did not play a part in the ceremony. Once it was over, I was the only one who actually wanted to and started wearing the kirpan. I went home and asked my dad for the kirpan that he used to wear, but had not worn it for the seventeen years that he had been outside of India.

I became an "Amritdhari Sikh" at the age of sixteen. There was no precedent before, in the sense that none of our relatives or friends actually wore kirpans, a visible symbol of having taken

Amrit. If there were any, then it was certainly a rarity that I had never seen.

A few things which the "Sant" would talk about in his discourses, I had translated to me by my father, i.e., "don't eat meat since we have modern factories to produce other foods". Just shortly after having taken Amrit, I thought it was a good idea and abstained as much as I could. I completely stopped eating meat shortly thereafter. Apart from myself and the non-wearing of the kirpan by my father, the rest of our family continued eating meat and did not even observe the other requirements (except for my father) as to kachha, kirpan and kangha. When I asked my father why he didn't wear the kirpan, he told me that it wasn't required in the Western countries, because the police were more efficient at their jobs. There really wasn't a need to wear it to defend oneself.

Eating of meat is not prohibited in the Sikh religion. I stopped eating it not because of some religious conviction, but simply because I did not find any taste for it. Eggs were fine, but those I stopped eating since 1974. In the two years I attended college, I read books on how modern society, with its mass food production techniques, throws caution to the wind when increasing meat production through the use of chemicals. Even the government departments have little control over the question of hygiene in abattoirs. I became a member of the

Toronto Vegetarian Society and subscribed to their Newsletter. I guess the same case could be made for vegetables and the use of pesticides and sprays to make apples look shiny. No doubt these are matters of serious concern. In fact a recent TV show "Donahue", discussed the whole issue of contracting cancer from fresh fruit and vegetables which have been exposed to pesticides, etc.

For many years, I remained involved in the meat eating controversy many Sikhs find themselves in. There were people who would quote from the Guru Granth for and against it. It was not only the question of eating-or-not-eating meat, but related ideas about, "Thou shalt not indulge in Lust, Anger, Greed, Attachment and Ego". This message is preached day-in and day-out in the gurdwaras. In fact, all the kathas (religious lectures) that I ever heard, are always uttered in "sadh mode", i.e., with no consequence to how we actually live as mortals, in an imperfect world, where we all have faults and misgivings. Looking back at my experience of having gone to many diwans and gurpurbs (celebrations of the gurus) at gurdwaras (Sikh place of worship), I must say that it is extremely difficult for a person to remain of sound mind and body, a whole person.

The main concern here, is the question of how does one relate our guru's teachings in the present context? The manner in which gurdwaras function, creates a ghetto mentality among

the young people, who because of their natural naivete/innocence are prone to becoming "unbalanced" or extreme in their view of life. Let's face it, our adolescents need support during a critical period of their life when attitudes are being formed. They search for a sense of "belonging". Since we as a community have no educational process in motion, this is one reason which reinforces an attitude whereby social responsibility is often looked at with scorn.

The whole business of wearing the kirpan and the symbols really affected me on two occasions which became etched in my memory. The first time was when I had to use it for self-defense. That occurred in the middle of the night in the summer of 1977. I was assaulted by a white person. He swore racial insults at me. I received a blow to my neck. My turban fell off and before he could lunge at me, I drew my kirpan. It was the appearance of the six-inch long blade which eventually persuaded my attacker to run. However, the incident left me with a sprained thumb. That's because although I wore my kirpan outside of my shirt, nonetheless, I could not get it unravelled from the gatra, to take it out.

The other time the kirpan became an issue, was when I suffered a back injury in 1979 and had to go for treatment at the Workmen's Compensation Hospital and Rehabilitation Centre Toronto. Though I was registered for outpatient therapy, I was

noticed by the hospital administration (because several patients felt afraid of the kirpan) and told to report to the attendance counsellor. There I was informed not to wear it, but only carry it as a symbol on the kangha (comb) itself - apparently some person from Pape gurdwara known as Mr. Surjit Singh Hans, had a license as a "priest" (to officiate and authorize Sikh marriage certificates) and exhorted other Sikhs that the kangha "kirpan" was sufficient in a hospital setting. The attendance counsellor did not agree with my desire to keep the big kirpan, which I felt was the only one that can be carried. I refused to oblige but suggested that I would contact other members of the community who would intervene.

When I tried to get some members of the community involved, no one was really bothered to help. As I learned later on, there was no person, let alone any organization that would intervene on my behalf. So what happened? I suffered back pain and yet I could not remove my kirpan for the occasion of being treated in a hospital setting. That decision not only cost me my compensation claim (no money), but caused incredible anguish for five years to come. Who intervened on my behalf? No one. Since I was "absent without leave" my claim had been suspended. In the tradition Sikh spirit of defiance, I sought the counsel of The Ontario Human Rights Commission and launched a complaint of discrimination on May 2, 1979. The matter did not get resolved and the next year, there was a public hearing on September 24-25, 1980.



Exactly two weeks before the court date, I had contacted Prof. Uday Singh of Sudbury to come as an expert witness on Sikhism. He agreed. When I didn't hear from him as the court day approached, I called some of his friends (Jai Singh) and finally reached him on the telephone a day before the hearing, at Mr. Gurdip Singh Nagra's residence. It was 10:30 P.M. I reminded him of his promise, but he replied, "I have been involved in an assault case against Siri Guru Singh Sabha (Weston Road gurdwara) and am about to leave to board a bus to Sudbury?" I was disappointed and shocked by what he had said. I considered it as irresponsible behaviour because he backed out at the last minute, and never had the decency to inform me ahead of time. Of course, the scene in the courtroom was a complete embarrassment not only to myself, but to the whole Sikh community. No one came from the Executive committees of the gurdwaras, even though I had made them aware a few weeks earlier in advance. I thought these people would

be concerned about supporting the community's right to wear religious symbols (kirpan). The facts prove otherwise.

A few weeks after the hearing, I approached Mr. Gobinder Singh Randhawa, secretary of Siri Guru Singh Sabha (Weston Road gurdwara). I mentioned to him that nobody came from the Executive of the Weston Road gurdwara. His response left me stunned. He said (in Punjabi) "Why should anybody have come



from this gurdwara? You called Mr. Uday Singh as an Expert Witness. We have nothing to do with him". Somehow, this response did not make sense to me. I thought, regardless of their dealing with Mr. Uday Singh, they should still have sent their representative, since it was a Sikh Rights case (and not really my personal case). This encounter gave me a taste of what was yet to come. But I still had difficulty with the thought that my own people, that is Sikhs, did not show any concern about a case that would eventually set a precedent for the kirpan in Canada. [Actually, this is the first case in the history of the Sikhs in Canada].

Seven people attended, and they were as follows: Harbhajan Singh, Hardev Singh, Ishar Singh, Charan S. Aheer, Gian Kaur Nagra, Satnam Singh and Bhupender Singh; the last two people abruptly walked out of the court proceedings as a knee-jerk reaction to my testimony. In the course of my testimony about swimming pool therapy, (I had never taken swimming nor entered a pool in my life) I did not know what to do with the kirpan and kachha. The hospital staff wanted everybody to wear swimming trunks. I figured the heavy swimming trunks would reveal less of my private parts than the flimsy cotton-kachha that I wore. To save myself from embarrassment, I removed both the kirpan and the kachha and put them in a locker assigned to me. The people that walked out were Amritdhari Sikhs, but they did not even have the decency of hearing me out. In my testimony, I admitted to having made a grave error and

that I asked for forgiveness. [As I look back, I know that there was nobody from whom I was expected to beg forgiveness. I just said this in the courtroom, to conform with the accepted norms that the Amritdhari's are supposed to be governed by, so as not to jeopardize the kirpan case]

When those two people walked out so abruptly, naturally heads turned to notice it. But for me, it became worse when Ishar Singh's testimony conflicted with mine on the issue of our five K's. He insisted one of them is the Keski (protector of Keshas) and not Keshas itself as per the Sikh Rehat Maryada. On the following day of testimony, this was also echoed by Mrs. Nagra. I was deeply worried about the impression of confusion that was being given to the authority figures who were going to decide for or against the kirpan.

Dr. John W. Spellman was called from both parties to testify as an expert witness on the precepts of Sikhism. His presence in this as well as other hearings, indicates the inability of the Sikh community to provide persons of similar calibre that could act when required. In 1981, the case was decided in my favour, but was appealed by the Compensation Board. The appeal was abandoned in 1986. So, I "won", but the question is, at what cost? This whole episode has left me wondering about whether the outcome of my case had any affect on the Sikh community.

In 1982, we had the shooting incidents - one involving Kuldip Samra at Osgoode Hall Courthouse and the other involving Fauja Singh Bains at Bloor and Yonge Streets in downtown Toronto. Since I maintained a newspaper clipping file on Sikhs of Toronto going back to 1960, I read with interest the developments of both cases. When the judge handed down a decision regarding the shooting at Bloor and Yonge, these were the headlines in the Toronto newspapers: " 'Callous' Sikhs get lengthy prison terms for shootings; 'Ruthless gunmen' get stiff jail terms; Security heavy as two Sikhs found guilty". Judge Hugh Locke sentenced Fauja Singh Bains to life imprisonment.

From the Toronto Star of June 9, 1983 it reports how much of a difficult time the judge had in dealing with the testimony of 42 witnesses. "The judge had to unravel a month's complex and often contradictory testimony in his 90 minute ruling. He relied heavily on evidence from police officers and non-partisan, non-Sikh witnesses". Now most of those 42 people were Amrtidhari Sikhs. All of them had to leave their kirpans outside of the courtroom. Security was so heavy, that the court staff, the judge and the lawyers wore bullet-proof vests; metal detectors were used and even the paper dispensers in the washrooms were searched.

It is a known fact that a majority of the 42 witnesses were Amritdhari Sikhs. Their behaviour (lies) in the courtroom

resulted in a strong sentence for Fauja Singh. From the perspective of the community, he got two "sentences", one for the trigger that he pulled and the second for the behaviour of our community, i.e., in the contradictory testimony that sent a signal to the judge.

How did this affect me? I questioned my wearing of the kirpan. To me the kirpan meant the symbolic as well as the practical fight of good vs evil. This incident proved to me beyond a shadow of a doubt, that some mechanism needs to exist to overlook, to monitor, to keep in check the responsibility an Amritdhari Sikh takes upon him/herself at the time of baptism. I could not tolerate a disrespect of my kirpan by our own people. I still have a high regard for it. There are many issues to be resolved. As a symbol of my defiance against how the Amritdhari's behaved, I stopped wearing it.